

CHAPTER 2

1968-1969:

INTRODUCTION to the SCUDERIA FILIPINETTI L-88 CORVETTES

What happened later that year between Switzerland and Michigan? Who made the first step, Duntov or the Swiss Team? It is hard to say now, 43 years later, but it has often been written that Greder and Bob Lutz approached Filipinetti. In his recently published autobiography, Henri Greder insists on the central role played by Bob Lutz. Lutz, Swiss born himself, was then a young manager at GM-France and he had helped Greder to start the "Power Team"...later to become "Greder Racing Team". Henri Greder also knew Georges Filipinetti (the owner of the "Scuderia") and his Team Manager Claude Sage. And don't forget also, that Zora Arkus Duntov could speak French, and had no problem communicating with any of these people. We're still not sure who put forward the first proposition but, regardless, a deal would soon be made.

Originally, a three-car team had been planned but, as it transpired, only two L-88 Corvettes would be built and sold to Filipinetti. Both cars left the factory in St-Louis in January 1968. Filipinetti's Chief Mechanic (Franco Sbarro) was sent to Michigan to assist with the preparation of these two Corvettes.

1968 Le Mans (September 28-29, 1968)

For 1968, the Le Mans race was postponed to September after major strikes and riots (*the famous "May 68 Movement" as the French would call it*) paralysed France for weeks. The two L-88 Corvettes would remain in Switzerland until then.

Had the race taken place in June (as usual), the first Corvette would have been driven by Henri Greder and Jean-Claude Killy. Only a few months earlier, Killy had taken three Gold Medals in the Winter Olympics at Grenoble (*Alpine skiing: Slalom, Giant Slalom, and Downhill*). Killy's popularity was huge. He had just signed a contract with Mark McCormack, and was about to do some PR actions for GM. Killy had little motorsport experience, but had won the GT category at the 1967 Targa Florio, co-driving a Porsche 911 with journalist Bernard Cahier.

Also, had there not been the unfortunate delay, the second car would have been driven Jean-Michel Giorgi, with whom Greder had won the Sports Car category at the 1967 Targa Florio, in a Ford GT40. Giorgi would have shared the wheel with Swiss driver Herbert Müller (CH) and French driver Jean Guichet (F). These drivers had already been named when Filipinetti announced his drivers in spring.

The change in date for the Le Mans event obviously affected the driver line-up.

The two 1968 L88 Corvettes registered for the September 28-29 LeMans, by Filipinetti, were:

- (VIN 194378S410300) – Assigned # 3. Drivers were Henri Greder and the great Umberto Maglioli (*Maglioli replaced Jean-Claude Killy who either had not been allowed by GM to take part in the race, or had other commitments*). Greder-Maglioli clearly dominated their class, during qualifications with a lap time of 3'59"08 and during the race, until problems occurred in the 6th hour. A holed piston ended their demonstration. According to Greder, the problem was caused by a corroded ventilation valve on the gas tank, and related to the fact that the car had been stored for a long time, between May and September. Because of this, the engine had been running too lean at high revs.
- (VIN 194378S408067) - Assigned # 4. Drivers were Sylvain Garant and Jean-Michel Giorgi. (*NOTE: This Corvette arrived in Switzerland through the customs at Geneva Airport, on May 25, 1968. This must be true for both cars BTW.*)

Garant and Giorgi adopted a slower pace than car #3 but became the new class leaders when Greder/Maglioli were forced to retire their car. Unfortunately, Sylvain Garant crashed the car in the "Dunlop Curve" during the 14th hour of the race. He had just taken the wheel from Giorgi. Garant had been surprised by the water that was flowing across the Dunlop curve during a heavy rain shower and lost control of the Corvette. He hit the curb and severely damaged the car. Scuderia Filipinetti's chief mechanic, Franco Sbarro, was in the pits when he heard the crash. Together with another crew member, he rushed towards Dunlop curve, and found the wrecked car, with its engine still running. Garant, who had not fastened his harness, had been thrown out of the Corvette, and was found nearly 30 meters away. Franco Sbarro would later buy what was left of this car. Remember this point for later in the story.

Le Mans 1969 (June 14-15, 1969)

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(As an "aside", a second car may have been planned, by Filipinetti. The LeMans data seems to show a preliminary entry which indicated that a second entry might be driven by Henry Greder, Jo Bonnier and Masten Gregory. Quite often, the drivers announced in April were not the ones that would be at the start in June. You will recall that VIN 194378S408067 had been crashed in the previous year. It is possible that Filipinetti may have had hopes of getting another car.)

This time, Greder's co-driver was Reine Wisell, a young F3 driver from Sweden. Another F3 rising star from Sweden, Ronnie Peterson, was present as well, as back-up

driver. (Note that U. Maglioli was not the driver this time, as opposed to what is found on some websites, although he, as well as Sylvain Garant, had been announced in some publications earlier in spring.)

Greder easily qualified the Filipinetti Corvette with a 4'05"3 lap time. This was 20"5 faster than the team's Ferrari 275 GTB, and 22"9 faster than the best Porsche 911. He considered this margin as sufficient. Unfortunately, gearbox issues ended its race in the 16 th hour.

Greder and Wisell lead the GT class until around 8 P.M (ie: 6 hours into the race), Wisell comes into the pits, complaining about the gearbox. Half an hour later, Greder confirms that the linkage lacks precision. At 9 07' PM, Greder is back into the pits, with defective front brakes. Calipers are changed. 9 54' PM, the Corvette has lost its first gear. The gearbox seems OK, but the linkage seems to be the cause of the problems. At 3 30' AM, the car is still in the race despite more brake problems. At 4 20' AM, the Corvette, which had been slowly catching up with the best Porsche , loses 2 laps, again because of its brakes. Calipers are changed once again. 5 55' AM: It's all over; the Vette will not reach the finish line. Gearbox issues ended its race in the 16th hour.

At some point during the 24 hours, Greder was informed by Filipinetti Team manager Claude Sage, that the team planned to sell the Corvette and all the parts after the race, and that they thought that he might be interested in buying it. (For 1970, Filipinetti would not enter GT cars for Le Mans, but only the new Ferrari 512S in the Sport Cars Category.)

Greder did buy the car and would race it twice, once at Magny-Cours and then at the Tour de France. He finished 6th at Magny-Cours, with the # 184 still in the red Filipinetti livery. For the Tour de France the car ran as # 143. It was re-sprayed in Greder Racing colors and finished 2nd overall, and 1st in GT..

AUTUMN 1969: VIN #194378S410300 under GREDER RACING Team Colors.

Greder bought the L-88 and, on July14, raced it at Magny-Cours, still in the red Filipinetti livery (#184). He finished in 6th place.

The Corvette was then re-sprayed to Greder Racing Team colors: White body, Matt Black hood, Red/White/Blue side stripes. (BTW, these side stripes were an idea of Bob Lutz.)

1969 TOUR DE FRANCE (Sept. 18-26)

In this livery, Greder entered 410300 in the "Tour de France". This event had not been organized since 1964 but was being revived. It combined race tracks and special stages (mostly hill climbs), linked by non timed road sections (called "liaison" or "parcours routier") where competitors had to respect a given average

speed or pace. The 1969 "Tour" included nine 1 Hour Circuit Races (*two of these in neighbour countries, the Nürburgring in Germany and Spa-Francorchamps in Belgium*) as well as eleven special stages and hill climbs.

Greder knew he would have to drive the #143 Corvette alone along the 5000 kilometers of the Tour, including the non-timed sections as his navigator, André Vigneron was unable to drive. (*The two of them were old friends, who had started Rallying around 1953-54, together with other "members" of a small group from the "Café du Commerce" in their home town of Nancy.*) No one really expected them to reach the finish line in Biarritz .

The first leg, from Nice to Nancy was a true Rally. From the start, Greder had been confronted with persistent problems, but with exception of the first and last hill climbs, always managed to stay in the top ten. The carb, spark plugs, ignition had been checked, but nothing helped. As if this was not enough, another incident occurred during the "Col Bayard" hill climb. Henri knew that road by heart (*for obvious reasons, as the parents of his girlfriend Marie-Claude Beaumont lived nearby*), and expected to do well there. But, at an intersection, the Vette landed a bit hard after a jump, and before it reached the finish line, the oil pressure was down to zero. There was a hole in the sump and the oil was gone. Henri poured in some fresh oil anyway, and reached a local workshop in the next village. In the middle of the night, the mechanic put the car on the lift, and repaired the hole using a welding torch! Some time had been lost, but Greder had just managed to avoid the disqualification; the Vette was still in the race. They reached Nancy, 9th overall, 15 minutes behind the leading Porsche of Gérard Larousse. After a short rest, the Tour went on towards the Nürburgring in Germany, where Greder won the race. He finished 2nd behind the Ferrari 250LM of J-P Rouget at Spa-Francorchamps and Reims. The Corvette won again at Rouen, at Le Mans, as well as the special stage at Cap Frehel. But, through the night, the problems were back. Once again, spark plugs were changed, the carb was re-checked, they even drained the gas tank, without success. Finally, Greder replaced the complete ignition, using spare parts they had brought for Beaumont's Camaro. All of a sudden, the power was back, and he won at Clermond-Ferrand and again at the Tourmalet hill climb in the Pyrennées. At the end of the "Tour", Greder had won five races and two hill-climbs. Henri Greder's remarkable result in that event (2nd overall and 1st GT), represents a major achievement. These nine days in September 1969, and the battle with Larousse and his 911R, truly were the "Glory Days" of this Corvette.

(Greder Racing also entered a Camaro SS for Marie-Claude Beaumont. She easily won the class, finishing 1st in 8 out of 9 races, and winning 9 special stages and hill-climbs out of 11!)

At the end of 1969, Greder sold 194378S410300 to Jean-Claude Aubriet who would race it until 1973, competing four times at Le Mans 24 hours as well as two shorter (3 and 4 hours) races at Le Mans, and twice in the "Tour de France".

